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Recommended Citation

Chambers, David L. "Overstating the Satisfaction of Lawyers." *Law & Soc. Inquiry* (2013): 1-21.

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Overstating the Satisfaction of Lawyers

David L. Chambers

Recent literature commonly reports US lawyers as disheartened and discontented, but more than two dozen statistically based studies report that the great majority of lawyers put themselves on the satisfied side of scales of job satisfaction. The claim of this article is that, in three ways, these statistically based studies convey an overly rosy impression of lawyers' attitudes: first, that many of those who put themselves above midpoints on satisfaction scales are barely more positive than negative about their careers and often have profound ambivalence about their work; second, that surveys conducted at a single point in time necessarily fail to include the views of those who once worked in that setting but have now gone elsewhere; and third, that few studies address the problems of bias that may be caused by lower rates of response from the least satisfied persons in the population sampled.

I. A DIVIDED LITERATURE

The common measures of achievement in this country, income and status, miss a great deal that most workers care about when they make decisions about their jobs. Social scientists have thus long been interested in subjective measures of job satisfaction. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, measures of worker satisfaction are the “most frequently studied” variables in organizational behavior research (Spector 1997, 1).¹ In the United States, four large research organizations regularly survey samples of US workers about their satisfaction with their jobs. Year after year, according to the two longest-running of the four, the Gallup Organization and the General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Organization, around 86 to 90 percent of workers say they are “satisfied” with their jobs (Jones and Saad 2010; Smith 2011).² To be sure, satisfaction varies by occupation. Of 198 occupations for which, in 2007, the GSS had sufficient information regarding satisfaction, lawyers were close to the middle,

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1. A 2009 report from the Gallup Organization states that “the topic of job satisfaction has been studied and written about in more than 10,000 articles and publications” (Harter et al. 2006, 4).

2. The third organization, the Society for Human Resource Management, regularly reports satisfaction levels in the low 80 percents (SHRM 2012). The fourth organization, the Conference Board, reports markedly different results from the other three, despite asking a closely similar question. In 1987, in its first survey, the Board found 61 percent of workers satisfied. Since then the proportion satisfied has been in a general decline and in 2011 it was 47 percent. See Franco, Gibbons, and Barrington (2010) (for years 1987–2009) and Ray and Rizzacasa (2012) (for years 2010–2011).

lower than clergy and firefighters, higher than roofers and laborers, very close to accountants (Smith 2007, 3–4).³

Despite lawyers' middling ranking, the high satisfaction reported for workers in general might lead one to assume that the writing that addresses lawyers' work satisfaction would be uniformly rosy. In fact, however, scholars have noted an odd bifurcation in the literature on attorneys' satisfaction (Heinz et al. 2005, 256–59; Dinovitzer and Garth 2007, 23–26; Monahan and Swanson 2009, 452–55; Levit and Linder 2010, 3–8). As one scholar recently expressed it: "There are two literatures on lawyer satisfaction and their findings differ so starkly that one might wonder whether they are studying the same phenomenon" (Monahan and Swanson 2009, 452). On one side of the divide are dozens of journalistic accounts and some scholarly essays and books depicting lawyers, and particularly private practitioners, as disheartened and discontent. Among the most convincing of these is a 1999 article by Patrick Schiltz entitled "On Being a Happy, Healthy and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession" (Schiltz 1999). Schiltz reviews a substantial body of research reporting that attorneys in the United States suffer from major depressive disorders at much higher rates than nearly all other occupations, suffer unusually high incidences of anxiety and obsessive-compulsiveness, and suffer high rates of alcoholism, divorce, and suicide. He reviews surveys of attorneys that found only a minority of attorneys reporting themselves as "quite satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their work. He concludes: "It should not be surprising, then, that lawyers are indeed unhappy, nor should it be surprising that the source of their unhappiness seems to be the other thing they have in common: their work as lawyers" (Schiltz 1999, 881).

In the same journal issue, Kathleen Hull responds to Professor Schiltz in an equally convincing essay entitled "Cross-Examining the Myth of Lawyers' Misery" (Hull 1999). She reviews a wider range of surveys of attorneys than Schiltz and reports that "upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the most valid, well-designed research has produced little if any support for the notion that lawyers are unhappy in their work" (Hull 1999, 971). To the contrary, she finds that in such studies substantial majorities report themselves to be satisfied in varying degrees.

In the dozen years since the exchange between Schiltz and Hull, accounts of discouraged lawyers have proliferated in the scholarly and journalistic literature, but so too have surveys finding high levels of job satisfaction.⁴ In 2011, Jerome Organ identified twenty-six surveys of US attorneys published between 1984 and 2009 that included a scaled measurement of work satisfaction (Organ 2011).⁵ In some regards, the results of the studies are difficult to compare. The populations of lawyers they studied

3. On a scale of 1 to 4, the mean for all occupations was 3.30. The mean for lawyers was 3.33. For clergy, it was 3.79; for firefighters, 3.67; for laborers, 2.86; for roofers, 2.84; for accountants, 3.37. Fifty-two percent of lawyers put themselves into the highest category as "very satisfied."

4. For the literature stressing dissatisfaction, see examples cited in Daicoff (2008, 93).

5. Of the twenty-six studies, ten drew upon a national sample; most of the others were samples of practitioners in particular states or graduates of a single law school. Some studies with more than one phase are counted more than once among the twenty-six, including two waves of the still-ongoing After the J.D., a project of the National Association for Law Placement and the American Bar Foundation; three articles growing out of various years of the University of Michigan Alumni Surveys, conducted annually between 1966 and 2006; and four surveys, conducted roughly five years apart, by the Young Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association. Organ identified a few Canadian studies as well.

varied widely. Some surveys asked about satisfaction with career as a whole; others asked about satisfaction with current job or satisfaction with the decision to become a lawyer. The surveys used varying scales. Still, whatever the group of lawyers studied, whatever forms the questions took, whatever the scale, Organ found a striking consistency in the studies' findings. Very few attorneys said they were "dissatisfied." The huge majority reported themselves above the midpoint on whatever satisfaction scale was employed. In all but one of the twenty-six studies, 67 percent or more of respondents placed themselves above the midpoint. Indeed, in fifteen of the twenty-six, the percentage above the midpoint fell within the range of 76 to 82 percent, consistent with the levels of "satisfied" workers that the GSS, Gallup, and the Society for Human Resource Management have reported for US workers in general. (The one study of lawyers reporting that less than two-thirds of respondents were satisfied was also the only study conducted after the economic downturn in 2008) (Coffey 2009).⁶

The aim of this article is to merge these dissonant bodies of writing together into a single, moderately coherent story. In one sense the task is easy and probably would not be contested by many in either camp. Even if disproportionate numbers of attorneys suffer from alcoholism or depression, it could still be the case that two-thirds or three-fourths of all attorneys are well satisfied with their current jobs and their careers. My own attempt to bring the two literatures closer together involves an examination of the literature that might seem less vulnerable to attack—the studies based on well-designed surveys of the sort Kathleen Hull praised.⁷ My claim is that despite the very high proportion of attorneys who respond to surveys with positive views of their careers, there is less to the survey findings than meets the eye (including survey findings that I myself have reported). My points are three: first, that many of those who put themselves above midpoints on satisfaction scales are barely more positive than negative about their careers and might well speak of their careers in the same sort of beleaguered tones reported in the negative literature; second, that surveys conducted at a single point in time convey an incomplete impression of the satisfaction of work in any given setting (such as a law firm) because they necessarily fail to include the views of those who previously worked in that setting but have now gone elsewhere; and third, that few studies address the problem of bias that may be caused by lower rates of response from the least satisfied persons in the population sampled.

II. THE PROBLEM OF CHARACTERIZING FINDINGS REGARDING SATISFACTION

The many surveys of lawyers that ask about satisfaction nearly all employ some sort of positive-to-negative scale, commonly called a Likert scale, with four, five, or seven categories. Choosing to use a scale assumes, almost certainly accurately for most people, that satisfaction is experienced on a continuum, not as an absolute. Likert scales offer

6. Fifty-nine percent of a sample of 1,188 South Carolina lawyers surveyed in 2008 agreed or agreed strongly with the proposition "I am satisfied with my professional life at this point."

7. Hull and others have identified methodological problems in many of the pessimistically toned studies Schiltz relied upon (Hull 1999, 971–75; Organ 2011).

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great advantages and a few pitfalls (Friedman and Amoo 1999). In the case of surveys of satisfaction, the scales can lead to problems in characterizing the findings.

Here, as a starting point, are examples of the sorts of satisfaction questions that have been used in surveys of lawyers.

1. A four-point scale, with a label for each category:

*How satisfied are you with your current position?*⁸

- ☐ very dissatisfied
- ☐ somewhat dissatisfied
- ☐ somewhat satisfied
- ☐ very satisfied

2. A five-point scale, with a label for each category:

*How satisfied are you with your decision to become a lawyer?*⁹

- ☐ very dissatisfied
- ☐ moderately dissatisfied
- ☐ neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- ☐ moderately satisfied
- ☐ very satisfied

3. A seven-point scale with labels at the ends but not in between.

*How satisfied are you with . . . your career overall?*¹⁰

very dissatisfied							very satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

In responding to questions such as these, the overwhelming majority of lawyers have put themselves into one of the top two categories of satisfaction on questions with four- or five-point scales and into one of the top three categories of satisfaction on questions with seven-point scales (Organ 2011). Some authors reporting on the results of their surveys have simply reported mean scores and made no characterization whatever of the general level of satisfaction of their respondents (Dau-Schmidt et al. 2006),

8. This is the question asked by American Bar Association (American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division 1995, 2000). The same question was used by Susan Daicoff (Daicoff 2008, 127). A four-point scale with a somewhat differently phrased question but the same category labels was used by Paul Mattesich and Cheryl Heilman and by Susan S. Fortney (Mattesich and Heilman 1990, 95; Fortney 2000, 267 n172).

9. The After the J.D. Study has used this question in each of the first two waves of its ongoing study of attorneys who entered the bar in the year 2000. After the J.D. has not asked directly about overall job or career satisfaction, but two of the principals in the study have used the question about the decision to become a lawyer as the study's best measure of overall career satisfaction (Dinovitzer and Garth 2007, 21–23). The same question was used by John Monahan and Jeffrey Swanson (2009, 469–70). Five-category questions were also asked on ABA Young Lawyers Division surveys in 1984 and 1990 and by Lee E. Teitelbaum et al. in a study of graduates of the University of New Mexico Law School (American Bar Association 1984, 1990; Teitelbaum, Lopez, and Jenkins 1991, 473).

10. This is the question used in the Michigan alumni surveys. See discussion in text, *infra*. The Michigan questions in the same form have been used each year since 2001 by Kenneth Dau-Schmidt and colleagues to learn about the work satisfaction of the graduates of Indiana University School of Law-Bloomington (Dau-Schmidt et al. 2006, 1428 n5). Using questions in essentially the same form, the After the J.D. Project has asked, in each wave of its survey, about respondents' satisfaction with twenty aspects of their current positions (Dinovitzer et al. 2004; Dinovitzer, American Bar Foundation, and NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education 2009). For additional examples of seven-point scales, see Taber et al. (1988) and Sonsteng and Camarotto (2000). For an unusual example of a seven-point scale with labels for each category, see Hoffer and McLeod (1988, 27).

but many others group together the supermajority in their categories above the midpoint—usually around 80 percent in most surveys—and then point to the high contentment of US attorneys in general¹¹ or to the high contentment of respondents to their particular surveys.¹² I am among those who have done so.¹³ What we who conduct surveys have failed to point out to our readers and often, I suspect, failed to recognize ourselves, is that respondents need not have been especially contented to put themselves into the first of the categories above the midpoint of our scales, a category commonly selected by a large proportion of respondents—frequently, for example, by 40 percent or more of all respondents to five-category questions (American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division 1984, 1990).¹⁴ Look at the labels on the example questions above. What does it take to be “moderately satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied”? Imagine asking a friend about a restaurant where she has recently eaten. She tells you she was “moderately satisfied” with her meal. Would you call and make a reservation?

In fact, given the language of the questions, the first category above the midpoint would have been the appropriate choice for those who were barely more positive than negative about their careers. To include the barely positive in a larger group and characterize them as “satisfied,” as many researchers have done,¹⁵ may well misrepresent how the barely positive would have described themselves. (That is, asked whether their checking of “somewhat satisfied” meant that they were “satisfied,” some would have said yes, while others would have said, “no, all I said was that I was ‘somewhat’ satisfied,” and insisted on the modifier.)

Much the same is true for the third example question above, the seven-category question with labels “very dissatisfied” and “very satisfied” at the endpoints. This question was used for twenty-six consecutive years by the University of Michigan Law School in surveys of its alumni.¹⁶ I codirected the Michigan project with Terry K. Adams during those years¹⁷ and became increasingly puzzled about the satisfaction of those in Category 5, the category just above the middle. In picking Category 5,

11. Organ, in summarizing the two dozen studies he found of attorney satisfaction, concluded that “three decades of empirical research [show] that on a fairly consistent basis roughly 79–80% of attorneys indicate that they are positively satisfied with their jobs/or careers” (Organ 2011, 273; Heinz et al. 2005, 271).

12. The ABA Young Lawyers Division, in reporting the responses to a five-point satisfaction question, combined the “somewhat satisfied” and the “very satisfied” and characterized them as “satisfied” (American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division 1991, 53). Other researchers have grouped the top two categories on the five-point scale similarly (Tucker, Albright, and Busk 1989, 164; Adams 1994, 1; Richard 2002, 1055; Monahan and Swanson 2009, 482).

13. Lempert, Chambers, and Adams grouped together the top three categories of seven, calling them “satisfied” (2000, 445). I took a different approach in *Accommodation and Satisfaction: Women and Men Lawyers and the Balance of Work and Family*. There I treated those in Category 5 separately, describing them as “somewhat satisfied,” and those in Categories 6 and 7 as “quite satisfied” (Chambers 1989, 275).

14. See, in addition, After the J.D. Waves 1 and 2 in answer to example question 2 above; the proportions in its Category 4 of five were derived from the Restricted Access Codebooks for Waves 1 and 2 (Dinovitzer et al. 2004; Dinovitzer, American Bar Foundation, and NALP Foundation for Law Career Research and Education 2009).

15. See notes 11–13.

16. A working paper reporting on the responses to Michigan’s satisfaction questions and on the variables that correlate strongly with satisfaction is available online. See Chambers (2013).

17. The survey was started in 1966 by Richard Wellman. Terry Adams and I took over in 1981 after Professor Wellman moved to another law school.

graduates were not neutral. They were placing themselves closer to “very satisfied” than “very dissatisfied.” Yet, to an even greater extent than those putting themselves in the second highest category on a five-point scale, many of the Michigan graduates who put themselves into Category 5 on a seven-point scale may well have been barely more positive than negative about their work. The most that can confidently be claimed when grouping together those above the midpoint is that they were “positive” about their careers, a word that some would read as synonymous with “satisfied” and some would read as considerably weaker.

It would thus appear, based on a parsing of language, that the gap between the positive and negative literatures about attorney satisfaction can be narrowed to some degree simply by recognizing the logical limits on the positive claims. The same problems of characterization are posed in the surveys of US workers in general mentioned at the beginning of this article. For forty consecutive years, the University of Chicago’s GSS has asked workers a job-satisfaction question with four categories: “On the whole, how satisfied are you with the work you do—would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?” (Smith 2011).¹⁸ Combining the top two categories, the GSS reports that about 86 percent of US workers are “satisfied” with their jobs,¹⁹ but just as is the case with the satisfaction studies of attorneys, the most that can be confidently claimed for those in the combined top two categories is that they were all at least slightly more positive than negative about their work. The same is true for Gallup, which uses a four-point question closely similar to GSS.²⁰

A closer look at the Michigan surveys provides corroboration for what language alone suggests. In each of the twenty-six years of the Michigan survey, just as in all the other surveys Organ identified, the huge majority of the graduates rated their overall career satisfaction on the positive side of the scale. During the final ten years of the survey, for example, when questionnaires were sent annually to graduates who were five, fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-five, and forty-five years out of law school, a highly varied group,²¹ only 16 percent of the 6,700 responding graduates placed themselves at the midpoint or below on the question asking about overall career satisfaction. The remaining 84 percent put themselves into one of the higher three categories—25 percent into Category 5, 41 percent into Category 6, and 18 percent into Category 7. (A detailed table displaying satisfaction for the seven categories by years out of law school can be found in the Appendix [Table A]. I have separated the respondents by years out of law school because years out of law school is strongly related to overall satisfaction among Michigan’s graduates.)

To learn more about how the 25 percent of respondents who recorded themselves as a 5 felt about their careers, I looked at their answers to other questions that bore a

18. The GSS questions also have a “don’t know” category, but very few respondents choose this answer in response to the job satisfaction question (Tom Smith, pers. comm.).

19. “[T]here has been little change in the level of job satisfaction over time. The long-term average has been for 86% to be satisfied with their work” (Smith 2011, 3). In the same report, Smith displays separately the percentages who were “very satisfied” and “somewhat satisfied,” permitting a careful reader to see that many respondents were merely “somewhat satisfied” (Smith 2011, Table 4).

20. “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your job? Would you say you are completely satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or completely dissatisfied with your job?”

21. Much more about the characteristics of the Michigan graduates can be found in two articles about the results of forty years of surveys (Chambers and Adams 2009a, 2009b).

relationship to overall satisfaction. The survey asked not only a global question about overall satisfaction but also questions about satisfaction with particular aspects of work (including, most notably, satisfaction with the balance of work and private life, with control over the work they do, with the value of their work to society, with relationships with coworkers, with income, and with intellectual challenge). It also included two questions that cast light on overall satisfaction from other perspectives: whether the respondents expected to be working for the same firm or organization in five years²² and whether, if the respondent were a recent college graduate, he or she would choose to attend law school again.²³ Table 1 compares, for the graduates five years out of law school, the responses to these other questions of those who put themselves into Category 5 on overall satisfaction with the responses of those who put themselves into Category 3 or 4 (on the one hand) or into Category 6 or 7 (on the other). As the table reveals, the 5s were in many respects decidedly more positive than the 3s and 4s but decidedly less positive than the 6s and 7s. In comparison with the 6s and 7s, the 5s were much less likely to say they would go to law school again, much less likely to say they expected to work for the same employer, and much less satisfied with the balance of work and family and with the value of their work to society. (In Appendix Table B, the same comparisons, less dramatic but still striking, are provided for the practitioners fifteen and twenty-five years out of law school.)

A little more background about the Category 5 respondents may cast light on why they might well have been ambivalent about their work. Among those five years out of law school, 60 percent of the Category 5s, a total of 304 individuals, worked at the time of the survey in law firms with more than fifty attorneys.²⁴ Nearly all were associates, reporting substantial stress and working very long hours—more than half saying they averaged fifty-five or more hours per week, the equivalent of ten hours each weekday, and five more hours on Saturdays. While these large-firm associates got along well with coworkers and earned high incomes, they faced substantial uncertainty about becoming partners. Three-fourths felt so-so or dissatisfied with the social value of their work.²⁵ Despite having earned higher grades on average than the rest of their classmates, only half agreed even slightly that they would attend law school again if they were a recent college graduate. By putting themselves into Category 5, they indicated positive views about their career. Yet even if we take them at their word, few of them seem very enthusiastic.²⁶

22. Of course, it is quite possible to be highly satisfied with one's current job but expect to leave it within the next five years. That was a state of mind particularly prevalent among graduates working in government five years after graduation.

23. Those who say they probably would not go to law school again are not necessarily dissatisfied with their careers. They may simply wish they had pursued some other path.

24. Among the graduates five years out, 50 percent of the 6s and 7s, and 68 percent of the 1s, 2s, 3s, and 4s, also worked for firms of more than fifty lawyers.

25. For five-year graduates in private firms, overall career satisfaction correlated more strongly with satisfaction with the social value of their work than it did with any other component of satisfaction. For the five-, fifteen-, and twenty-five-year graduates in private law firms, satisfaction with the social value of work also correlated more strongly than any other component of satisfaction with the respondents' inclination to attend law school again.

26. Somewhat surprisingly, the story is very little different for the Category 5s who worked in firms of eleven to fifty lawyers. They worked as long of work weeks as those in larger firms, only half thought it likely that they'd attend law school again, and two-thirds felt so-so or dissatisfied with the social value of their work.

TABLE 1.
Responses to Other Satisfaction-Related Questions of Practitioners in Categories 3–4, Category 5, and Categories 6–7 on Question About Overall Career Satisfaction, University of Michigan Law School, Classes of 1992–2001, surveyed 1997–2006 When Five Years After Graduation

		Practitioners Five Years Out of Law School		
		Categories 3 and 4 Respondents (n = 387)	Category 5 Respondents (n = 515)	Categories 6 and 7 Respondents (n = 776)
1	Report high stress at work ^a	85%	75%	65%
2	Won't or probably won't be in same job in 5 years ^b	81%	53%	26%
3	So-so or negative about attending law school again ^c	67%	50%	26%
4	So-so or negative about balance of work and private life ^d	85%	61%	39%
5	So-so or negative about control over work	74%	39%	9%
6	So-so or negative about value of work to society	86%	64%	24%
7	So-so or negative about coworker relationships	52%	12%	3%
8	So-so or negative about income	29%	24%	21%
9	So-so or negative about intellectual challenge of work	53%	20%	3%
10	So-so or negative about two or more of above six aspects of career (Lines 4 through 9 above)	98%	75%	26%
11	So-so or negative about three or more of above six aspects of career (Lines 4 through 9 above)	87%	37%	5%
12	Quite positive about three or more of above six aspects of career (Lines 4 through 9 above) ^e	12%	28%	87%

^aIn response to a seven-point question on stress at work, with 1 labeled “none at all” and 7 labeled “a great deal,” these respondents answered with a 5, 6, or 7.

^bThe survey asked: “Look ahead five years. Do you expect to be working five years from now in the same setting (same government agency, same firm, etc.) in which you are currently working?” Respondents were asked to check one of four boxes: yes, probably yes, probably not, no. This row includes those who answered “probably not” or “no.”

^cThe survey asked: “If I were a recent college graduate today, knowing what I now know about law school and law practice, I would choose to go to law school again.” Respondents were asked to circle a number between 1 and 7 with 1 labeled “strongly agree” and 7 labeled “strongly disagree.” This row includes those who put themselves into Categories 4, 5, 6, or 7.

^dThe survey asked, on the same 1 to 7 scale as it asked about overall career satisfaction, about satisfaction with eight particular aspects of respondents’ work and career, with 1 labeled “very dissatisfied” and 7 labeled “very satisfied.” This row includes those who put themselves into any of the lowest four categories.

^eTo be counted as quite positive as to an aspect, respondents put themselves into Category 6 or 7.

But perhaps we should not take the Category 5 respondents at their word. It is quite possible that many Category 5 responses were the product of social desirability bias, a distortion in responses to surveys caused by the common human impulse to present oneself in a positive manner both to oneself and to others.²⁷ Such distortions have been found in surveys of job satisfaction among workers in other settings (Arnold, Feldman, and Purbhoo 1985, 958–65). Within the Michigan surveys, respondents who believed they were fortunate to earn large amounts of money in a prestigious setting might have resisted acknowledging to others that they felt so-so or negative about their work. Similarly, some who felt stuck in their current jobs might have needed to persuade themselves that they felt at least somewhat positive about what they were doing.

Viewing Michigan's Category 5 respondents in the context of the wider literature about lawyers, I now suspect that a large proportion of them, though they circled a number on the positive side of the satisfaction scale overall, would talk about the practice of law in a manner completely consistent with the reports in the negative literature—stories of exhaustion and stress, of little time with family, of uncertain futures, and of discouragement with the worthiness of the work they were doing.

We who write about the satisfaction of attorneys would be wise to find better ways of conveying that the huge majorities who place themselves on the positive side of our scales vary widely in their enthusiasm. The data from Michigan suggest that more than two groupings are needed—more than just the “satisfied” and everyone else. To convey more effectively the range of attitudes among those on the positive side of the scale, a more instructive way to describe the Michigan respondents would be to report them in three groupings: the lowest four categories, who could be described as “discouraged or negative”; the group in Category 5, who could be described as “positive but with substantial misgivings”; and the remainder in Categories 6 and 7, who could be described as “quite positive.” In labeling groups of categories, I suggest avoiding any form of the word “satisfied” because of the variations in the uses of the word that I have discussed above.²⁸

Making such a change in reporting would substantially alter the impression conveyed to readers regarding the overall pattern of contentment of the Michigan graduates. For all classes taken together, instead of reporting 84 percent as “satisfied,” Michigan would instead report 25 percent as “positive but with substantial misgivings,” and 59 percent as “quite positive.”²⁹ For the classes five years out, the change would be particularly dramatic. Instead of reporting 74 percent as “satisfied,” Michigan would report 30 percent as “positive but with substantial misgivings,” and only 44 percent as “quite positive.” Such a change would both convey a more accurate impression of the proportion of lawyers who are enthusiastic about their work and, for the first time, place a spotlight on the substantial group of practitioners who feel quite ambivalent. Even though Michigan's graduates are hardly representative of US practitioners as a whole—among other differences, a much higher percentage of its graduates work in large law firms than is the case with most schools—I nonetheless suspect that other researchers

27. A seminal study of the phenomenon is by Douglas Crowne and David Marlowe (1964).

28. See text at n. 26.

29. See the “Total” line in Appendix Table A.

who survey attorneys about their careers, if they took a close look at their data, would find substantial numbers of quite conflicted respondents who nonetheless placed themselves on the positive side of their scales.³⁰

III. THE SNAPSHOT PROBLEM

All but a few empirical studies of practicing attorneys rest on a one-time survey that asks about satisfaction at the current time—a snapshot of satisfaction, if you will.³¹ For our purposes, the problem with the snapshot is twofold. A first problem, about which I will say very little, is that answers to questions about satisfaction are often affected by the immediate context in which the questions are asked—by other near events in the respondent's life, particularly ones that are strongly positive or negative, but even by the weather on the day of the survey (Kahneman and Krueger 2006, 6–8). Most individuals' satisfaction with their work fluctuates within a narrow range, but on any given day a respondent might place himself or herself at a high or low point within the range. Researchers hope that such transitory effects occur at random among their respondents, edging some individuals' satisfaction up and others' down, but roughly cancelling each other out.

A second problem with the snapshot, about which I will say more, is not so much a failing as a limitation. Attorney studies survey lawyers currently working in various sorts of settings—large firms, small firms, government, and so forth—and gather information about satisfaction at that moment in time. This information is highly useful but nonetheless conveys an incomplete picture of the satisfaction of working in any given setting because it necessarily fails to include the views about working in that setting of those who previously worked there but have now gone elsewhere.³² This gap is particularly unfortunate with regard to work in private law firms because the reported dissatisfaction with law firm practice of those who have left is a major theme in the writing about lawyer discontent (Arron 2003). A few attorney studies acknowledge this limitation in their data (Richard 2002, 993; Heinz et al. 2005, 272). A few others have sought solutions within the confines of a snapshot. Thus, for example, the ongoing After the J.D. Project, a study of attorneys who joined the bar in the United States in the year 2000, asks respondents about their reasons for leaving prior jobs. Most studies reporting on satisfaction do not, however, mention the snapshot problem at all.

The most reliable way to learn about the satisfaction with a setting of those who have left is to conduct surveys of the same group at two or more points in time—what are commonly called longitudinal surveys. On the first occasion (T1), the group—for

30. To permit more readily identifying those who are ambivalent about their work, future researchers would probably be wise to employ seven-point scales of satisfaction, rather than four- or five-point scales.

31. Among the exceptions are three studies in which individual responses from the same respondents can be matched (Hagan and Kay 1995; Monahan and Swanson 2009; Organ 2011). In one other study, the authors returned to the same sample group on a second occasion, but individuals' responses to the first survey were not matched with their responses to the second (Heinz et al. 2005).

32. As Kathleen Hull has stated, "we need longitudinal studies that track changes [in] individuals' satisfaction over time and allow examination of the interplay between satisfaction and various career processes" (Hull 1999, 697).

example, a sample of attorneys working in law firms—is surveyed about its work satisfaction. On the second occasion some years later (T2), the surveyors learn which respondents have remained in law firms and which have left for other settings and compare the two groups' satisfaction at T1. Thus the After the J.D. Project, in addition to its questions about prior jobs, has surveyed the same sample population at three points a few years apart.³³

The Michigan Alumni Surveys for the classes of 1982 through 1991 aptly illustrate what is necessarily missing in snapshots of satisfaction as well as some of the advantages of the longitudinal survey. These classes were surveyed five years after graduation and again fifteen years after graduation. The huge majority of the graduates in these classes—84 percent—started their careers in private law firms (sometimes after a judicial clerkship). By the fifth year, however, the proportion working in firms had declined to 67 percent and by the fifteenth declined to 46 percent. A snapshot at the fifteen-year point reveals that about five of every six of those still working in firms put themselves into one of the positive categories (5, 6, or 7) on the question about overall satisfaction. Fifty-nine percent put themselves into one of the top two categories. But how about the very large numbers of respondents who had left law firms by this time? It could be that most who left a firm after their fifth year had been quite contented but, having gained law firm experience, moved to another setting that might have been their goal all along, or it could be that, whatever their long-term goal, their years in a law firm had not been particularly satisfying.

It is at this point that the longitudinal data becomes helpful. Seventeen hundred and twenty-four members of these Michigan classes responded to both a five- and fifteen-year survey.³⁴ Of these, 1,038 were working in a law firm at the five-year point. Table 2 displays the satisfaction at the five-year point of those who stayed in a private law firm and of those who left. It reveals, in the bottom line, that while a quarter of those who left law firm practice after the fifth year had, when surveyed in their fifth year, been quite positive overall about their experience, most had been much less positive and dramatically less positive than their classmates who remained in private practice. No surprise, really, but empirical confirmation for the negative literature claiming that large numbers of those leaving private practice have been unenthusiastic about their experience.

Another virtue of longitudinal studies of satisfaction, unavailable in snapshots, is that they permit studying patterns of change in individuals' satisfaction over time. As Table 2 reports, even among those who remained in private practice through the fifteenth year, only a minority—43 percent—had been quite positive about their law firm experience when surveyed five years out. What happened to their satisfaction over time? Did the satisfaction of those who remained in firms improve substantially by year fifteen as they became partners in the firms where they worked? And what about those

33. To date, no publications based on the After the J.D. have matched individual-level responses about satisfaction at two points in time.

34. Sixty-seven percent of the 3,746 graduates in these classes responded to the first survey and 58 percent responded to the second, but only 46 percent responded to both. Nonresponse bias becomes a greater concern when examining the smaller group who answered both surveys. We indeed have some evidence that those cooperative souls who answered fully two different surveys were, as a group, slightly more satisfied than their other classmates. Nonetheless, the numbers responding to both are large and, for purposes of the comparison made here, the surviving numbers are almost certainly sufficiently representative.

TABLE 2.
Michigan Law School Classes of 1982 through 1991, Overall Satisfaction at Five Years Out of Law School of Those Working in Private Firms at That Point, by Whether They Were Still Working in Private Firms in Fifteenth Year

Among those working in law firms in fifth year:	n =	Satisfaction Category in Fifth Year			Mean satisfaction*
		1–4	5	6–7	
Those still working in a law firm ten years later	682	24%	33%	43%	5.15
Those no longer working in a law firm ten years later	356	40%	35%	25%	4.65

* $p < .001$.

who left law firm practice? Did they find greater satisfaction in other settings—or were they, in large numbers, persons who were not going to find much satisfaction anywhere? In answering these questions, it is instructive to subdivide those who remained in private firms into two groups: those who stayed at the same firm through the fifteenth year and those who shifted to a different firm. It is similarly instructive to divide those who left law firm practice into two groups: those who shifted to practice in some other setting, such as a corporate counsel’s office, and those who left the practice of law altogether. Table 3 reveals the quite striking differences in the patterns of satisfaction of these four groups over time.

Look at Line 1 in Table 3, at those who remained at the same law firm. Between the fifth and fifteenth years, their overall satisfaction rose modestly—perhaps surprisingly modestly considering that the huge majority transitioned from associate to partner during that period. Those in Line 2, the group who shifted to a different law firm, though less satisfied at five years than those who stayed at the same firm, improved their satisfaction substantially, to the point that they had become approximately as satisfied as those who had remained at their original firm. Similarly, those in the third line, the ones who shifted to practice in a nonfirm setting (mostly as corporate counsel, but some in government), though even less satisfied at five years than those who changed firms, had become fully as satisfied in their new settings as those still in firms. The size of their increase in satisfaction is remarkable. Even more remarkable, however, is the increase in satisfaction revealed in Line 4 for those who left the practice of law altogether. Like those in Line 3, those who left the practice of law had been much less satisfied at five years than those who stayed in firms but, by the fifteenth year, in their new settings (a plurality as businesspersons, but also as teachers, government officials, executives of nonprofits, etc.), this group had become significantly more satisfied than those still practicing, regardless of setting. From only a quarter of them being quite positive about their work at five years out, three-quarters had become quite positive by fifteen. It is thus clear that those who left law firm practice to work elsewhere were not, in general, persons doomed to discontent wherever they worked.

Some might wish to draw from Table 3 that attorneys who are unhappy in law firms would be wise to shift to nonfirm settings, but that would be the wrong inference, since

TABLE 3.
Michigan Law School Classes of 1982 Through 1991, Those Working in Law Firms in Fifth, Satisfaction at Fifth and Fifteenth Years,
by Setting of Work in Fifteenth Year

	Among those working in law firms at fifth year:	n =	Fifth-Year Survey		Fifteenth-Year Survey		Percentage point increase between fifth and fifteenth year of those in Category 6 or 7*
			Mean satisfaction*	In overall satisfaction Category 6 or 7 in fifth year*	Mean satisfaction*	In overall satisfaction Category 6 or 7 in fifteenth year*	
1	Those who stayed at the same law firm	349	5.30	48%	5.48	57%	+9
2	Those who moved to a different law firm	333	5.00	38%	5.41	54%	+16
3	Those now practicing in a nonfirm setting	208	4.72	25%	5.51	60%	+35
4	Those working but no longer practicing law	141	4.51	24%	5.89	72%	+48

* $p < .001$ in all columns.

those who shifted to other settings were self-selected and might have had very different aspirations, skills, and personalities than those who stayed. What the table does seem to suggest is that Michigan's graduates have been quite fortunate in their mobility. Those who have not found private-firm work satisfying and tried something else have typically been able to find much more satisfying work. It is important to note, however, that the comparatively low satisfaction at five years out of law school of those who left law firm practice does not mean that their law firm experience was without value. Indeed, their later, higher satisfaction may well have been due in substantial part to the opportunities opened to them by having worked at their original firm or to the skills they developed at their original firm.

The longitudinal view provided by the Michigan data also illuminates job shifts in the other direction—that is, the changes in satisfaction between the fifth and fifteenth year of those who moved *into* a law firm from a setting other than a law firm. In viewing shifts in this direction, we start from a different base level of satisfaction because at five years out of law school, those who were working in settings other than private law firms were, as a group, substantially more satisfied with their careers than those working in firms: 59 percent of those not working in firms but only 43 percent of those working in firms were quite positive about their careers at the five-year point (6 or 7 on the seven-point scale). By the fifteenth year, about a sixth of those who had been working in a nonfirm setting at five years had shifted to a private law firm. The overall satisfaction of those who worked in nonfirm settings at both points remained, as a group, essentially unchanged—61 percent quite positive at five years, 60 percent quite positive at 15 years³⁵—but the satisfaction of those who left a nonfirm setting for a law firm declined somewhat—from 58 percent quite positive at five years down to 51 percent quite positive at fifteen. Thus, unlike shifts from law firms to nonfirm settings, shifts in the other direction were not typically accompanied by an improvement in satisfaction. On the other hand, shifts from nonfirm settings into firm settings did offer at least one compensating advantage—the earnings of those who shifted into law firms increased, on average, substantially more between the fifth and fifteenth year than the incomes of those who remained in nonfirm settings.³⁶

IV. THE PROBLEM OF NONRESPONSE

A risk all survey researchers face is that those who respond to their surveys differ in systematic ways from those who do not. If the respondents and nonrespondents differ significantly along any of the variables the researchers wish to study, the survey suffers from what is commonly called “nonresponse bias.” The risk of such bias increases as the rate of response declines. Sad to say, rates of response to surveys of all sorts have declined significantly in the United States over the past few decades.³⁷

35. That is, placing themselves in one of the top two categories of satisfaction out of seven.

36. The income of those who remained in nonfirm settings rose a mean of 97 percent; the income of those who shifted to a law firm rose a mean of 146 percent.

37. As recently stated in a report of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press: “The general decline in response rates is evident across nearly all types of surveys, in the United States and abroad”

As to studies of US lawyers in particular, of twenty-four studies conducted in the United States since 1984 that asked attorneys about their work satisfaction, eight had response rates below 40 percent, twelve had rates between 40 and 60 percent, and only four had rates above 60 percent. A response rate of 50 percent may well be a source of pride for those of us engaged in the tedious business of cajoling practitioners into responding to our questionnaires, but should still leave us asking whether our respondents are truly representative of our study population as a whole.

Findings about satisfaction with work are particularly susceptible to nonresponse bias because individuals' decisions whether to take the time to complete a questionnaire may be affected by how satisfied or engaged they are with their work.³⁸ It is thus discouraging that in the twenty-four studies of attorney satisfaction, only a few even mention the possibility of nonresponse bias.³⁹ Most that do mention it say little and put the issue aside.

Many reasons exist why attorneys might not respond to a survey asking questions about their careers. At least one might lead to a lower response rate by the most satisfied persons in the sample: that they are too busy to take the time. Other reasons are more uncertain in their relation to satisfaction, such as nonresponse from persons who simply never fill out surveys of any sort. Still others probably lead, at least in net, to lower responses by those who are the least satisfied, such as those who never receive the survey because they are no longer at their notified mailing addresses and have left no forwarding information; those who are most depressed or disorganized; and those who have left the practice of law embittered by the experience. Surveys such as Michigan's, conducted by law schools of their own alumni, may suffer from an overrepresentation of the most successful, who respond out of pride in their achievements or gratitude to their alma mater, and an underrepresentation of those most alienated by their law school experience, some of whom never open an envelope with the law school as return address, though there may also be an offsetting group who hated law school and practice and relish an opportunity to convey their disenchantment.

Measuring bias caused by nonresponse is difficult for the obvious reason that survey researchers typically have very little information about those in their sample who refuse to respond and the cost of gathering information about them independently is generally high. Nonetheless, a few researchers in employment contexts other than the legal profession have studied the specific question we are concerned with: the relationship between nonresponse and job satisfaction. Some have found no relationship (Thompson and Surface 2000). Some have found a significant negative relationship (Mueller, Voelke, and Hattrup 2010). Unfortunately, few studies of

(Pew Research Center 2012). A general decline occurred in the University of Michigan Law School surveys over the years. Of graduates surveyed when five or fifteen years out of law school, 75 percent responded in the years 1977–1986, 66 percent responded in the years 1987–1996, and only 59 percent responded in the final ten years of surveys, 1997–2006, despite greater efforts taken to improve response in the final years.

38. With slight hyperbole, Kenneth Dau-Schmidt and his coauthors, reporting on a study of the graduates of the University of Indiana Law School-Bloomington, said: "All surveys suffer from response biases, in particular that the more successful among those surveyed tend to be the ones who respond" (Dau-Schmidt et al. 2006, 1428 n5).

39. Heinz et al. (2005, 272) and the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division (2000) provide examples of studies that do discuss these problems.

attorneys have acquired any information at all about the characteristics of their nonrespondents.⁴⁰ Michigan's database probably contains as much or more such information about them as any but, regrettably, analysis of the Michigan nonrespondents provides few clues one way or the other regarding possible bias in the responses to the particular questions about career satisfaction. The remainder of this brief section relates the attempts made at Michigan to search for nonresponse bias and the unanswered questions that remain about nonresponse for attorney studies in general.

The Michigan project coded, for all graduates—both those who responded and those who did not—roughly a dozen items of information from their applications to law school and their records while in law school, including their sex, race, type of undergraduate school attended, undergraduate grade point average, years between college and law school, LSAT scores, first-year law school grade point average, and final law school grade point average. For a few early years, the project also coded the number of years graduates had contributed to the law school's annual giving fund. By numbering the questionnaires before mailing them, Michigan was able to link the file information with the survey responses.

To identify possible bias, we hypothesized that if, in any given year or groups of years, (1) some subgroup—women, for example—responded to our survey at significantly lower rates than men and (2) the women who did respond reported significantly lower levels of career satisfaction than the men, it would suggest (though hardly prove) that if all women and men in the class had responded to the survey, the overall mean level of satisfaction would have been somewhat lower than that of the respondents alone.⁴¹ As to women and men, it turned out that they responded at essentially equal rates and reported close to the same levels of satisfaction. Indeed, it turned out that there were few significant differences of any sort in response rates captured by the items of information available about the nonrespondents—and that where there were differences in response among subgroups, there were either no significant differences between subgroups of respondents in their overall satisfaction or if there were differences the differences were small enough that they suggested very little impact on overall satisfaction.⁴²

We also tried one other approach to identifying nonresponse bias by comparing those who responded to a five-year survey but not a fifteen-year survey with those who responded to both and this effort was equally unilluminating.⁴³ Since our inquiries

40. The Chicago lawyers study is a rare example of a study with a few pieces of information about each of their nonrespondents (Heinz et al. 2005, 20). A study comparing the white and minority graduates of the University of Michigan Law School also includes a detailed comparison of respondents and nonrespondents (Lempert, Chambers, and Adams 2000, 405–07).

41. For a discussion of this “archival” approach to examining for nonresponse bias, see Spitzmüller and Glenn (2006, 139–62).

42. Those with very low grades in law school and those who had never donated to the law school fund tended to respond at lower rates than those with higher grades and those who had been donors. They also tended, among those who did respond, to be slightly (but statistically significantly) less satisfied with their careers overall. Still after extrapolations, it seems likely that even if those with low grades and those who had never donated had responded to the survey at the same rate as others, it would have been unlikely to have lowered the overall satisfaction rate that we report by more than 1 or 2 percentage points.

43. The fifteen-year classes surveyed during the final ten years of the survey had all been surveyed about their satisfaction ten years before. For purposes of looking for bias, we divided into two groups those who had responded to the satisfaction questions on the earlier survey: (1) those who responded to both the

yielded little evidence of nonresponse bias, it may be tempting to conclude that nonresponse bias has not been a serious enough problem to justify concern. Such a conclusion seems, however, hazardous and premature. The information in the Michigan data set about those who never responded was largely limited to facts ascertainable at the point of graduation from law school—information from applications and law school records—and none of that information has ever proved of much use in explaining differences in career satisfaction among actual respondents. It is only information about life *after* law school, virtually none of which we had for nonrespondents, that has accounted significantly for differences in work satisfaction. For example, the single strongest variable accounting for overall career satisfaction was the level of stress respondents reported experiencing in their current place of work. The higher the stress, the lower the satisfaction.⁴⁴ (A long working paper exploring the variables most closely associated with overall satisfaction is available online.⁴⁵) If, as seems quite plausible, the response rate was lower among alumni who experienced particularly high stress at their workplace, then the overall satisfaction numbers that we report are probably too high. In a similar manner, there remain grounds for concern about a lower response rate by, among others, those most alienated from the profession and those who, for whatever reasons, are least proud of their achievements.

V. CONCLUSION

Let's take stock. One body of literature reports that attorneys are miserable. Another reports that in overwhelming numbers attorneys are satisfied with their jobs. The argument of the first and longest part of this article is that surveys of attorneys reporting high levels of job satisfaction commonly fail to recognize the ambivalence of many of those who say that they are "satisfied" to at least some degree and that, if the extent of that ambivalence were recognized, the tone of the two bodies of literature might be brought closer together. The second claim is that very few surveys, in reporting

five- and fifteen-year surveys and (2) those who responded to the five-year survey but not the fifteen. Our hypothesis was that if those who did not respond to the fifteen-year survey (Group 2) proved significantly less satisfied at five years out of law school than those who responded to both surveys, it would suggest, first, that those who did not respond to the second survey would probably have again been less satisfied at fifteen years than those who responded to both and, by extension and more speculatively, that those who responded to neither survey would probably have been even less satisfied than the one-time responders. We did in fact find that satisfaction was somewhat higher at the five-year point among those who responded to both the five- and the fifteen-year survey than it was among those who responded to the five-year survey only. Yet again, however, the difference in satisfaction at five years out between the one-time responders and the both-time responders, though statistically significant, was so modest that even if all the one-time responders had also responded to the fifteen-year survey and done so at a satisfaction level as much below the both-time responders as it had been at five years, the overall satisfaction level at fifteen years would have been only trivially reduced.

44. Despite the strong negative relationship between stress and satisfaction, the two variables were not tautological. Indeed, more than a third of all respondents reported both high stress (a 5, 6, or 7 on a seven-point scale) and a quite positive view on the satisfaction scale (a 6 or 7 on the seven-point scale). High stress and high satisfaction were particularly common, for example, among those working in public-interest settings. Conversely, some people, perhaps disengaged at work, reported low stress but also comparatively low satisfaction.

45. Chambers (2013).

on satisfaction among practitioners, and particularly law firm practitioners, have taken into account the views of the large numbers of lawyers who have worked in such settings but left and that when such views are taken into account, a less cheerful impression of law firm practice emerges. The final claim is that, because of possible nonresponse bias in the surveys, the extent of which is impossible to measure with available data, the actual numbers of discontented lawyers may well be somewhat higher than even well-conducted surveys have reported.

Taken together, a revised view would alter not at all one highly important finding of the surveys—that only a small proportion of attorneys hold negative views overall about their jobs or careers. Thus, to the extent that some of the informal literature about attorneys claims that most practitioners are deeply unhappy, that literature remains inaccurate and misleading. On the other hand, to the extent that the negative literature reports large numbers of beleaguered lawyers who feel unhappy or ambivalent about many aspects of their work, nothing in the survey literature, properly viewed, should be seen as inconsistent. The questions about satisfaction that survey researchers have asked and the results of the Michigan surveys suggest that among practicing lawyers there is indeed a smallish proportion who are quite unhappy and, at the other end of the happiness spectrum, a large but less large than widely reported proportion of quite contented lawyers, but that in between lies a broad band of practitioners who feel quite mixed about their work and the extent of whose discontent needs to be more fully recognized in the scholarly writing.

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APPENDIX

Appendix Table A.
Overall Career Satisfaction of Practitioners of Law, by Years Out of Law School, University of Michigan Law School Classes of 1952–2001, Surveyed 1997–2006

	n =	Very Dissatisfied 1	2	3	4	5	6	Very Satisfied 7	Overall Mean**
Graduates 5 years out (classes of 1992–2001)	1,759	0.4%	3%	8%	15%	30%	34%	10%	5.15
Graduates 15 years out (classes of 1982–1991)	1,398	0.7%	2%	3%	9%	28%	43%	13%	5.46
Graduates 25 years out (classes of 1972–1981)	1,520	0.2%	1%	5%	9%	27%	42%	16%	5.50
Graduates 35 years out (classes of 1962–1971)	1,216	0.4%	0.7%	2%	6%	20%	47%	25%	5.82
Graduates 45 years out (classes of 1952–1961)	807	0.1%	0.4%	0.4%	3%	15%	44%	37%	6.13
Total	6700	0.4%	1.7%	4%	9%	25%	41%	18%	5.53

** *p* < .001.

Appendix Table B.

Responses to Other Satisfaction-Related Questions of Practitioners in Categories 3–4, Category 5, and Categories 6–7 on Question About Overall Career Satisfaction, University of Michigan Law School, Classes of 1972–1991, Surveyed 1997–2006, When Fifteen or Twenty-Five Years After Graduation

		Practitioners 15 and 25 Years Out of Law School		
		Categories 3 and 4 Respondents (n = 373)	Category 5 Respondents (n = 795)	Categories 6 and 7 Respondents (n = 1,639)
1	Report high stress at work	52%	40%	24%
2	Won't or probably won't be in same job in 5 years	44%	22%	11%
3	So-so or negative about attending law school again	74%	45%	28%
4	So-so or negative about balance of work and private life	67%	52%	30%
5	So-so or negative about control over work	60%	25%	5%
6	So-so or negative about value of work to society	81%	55%	18%
7	So-so or negative about co-worker relationships	58%	22%	3%
8	So-so or negative about income	58%	29%	11%
9	So-so or negative about intellectual challenge of work	53%	17%	3%
10	So-so or negative about two or more of above six aspects of career (see Lines 4 through 9)	97%	64%	16%
11	So-so or negative about three or more above six aspects of career (see Lines 4 through 9)	83%	31%	2%
12	Quite positive about three or more of above six aspects of career (see Lines 4 through 9)	13%	30%	91%